WASHINGTON

Gay marriage ban appears headed for Senate defeat

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WASHINGTON • Short of votes and beset by internal divisions, Senate Republicans struggled Tuesday to salvage a respectable defeat for a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, an issue that President Bush pushed toward the top of the election-year agenda.

"This issue is not going away," Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee said in a virtual concession that the measure would fall short of the 60 votes needed to advance past a test vote today.

"Will it be back? Absolutely, yes," he added.

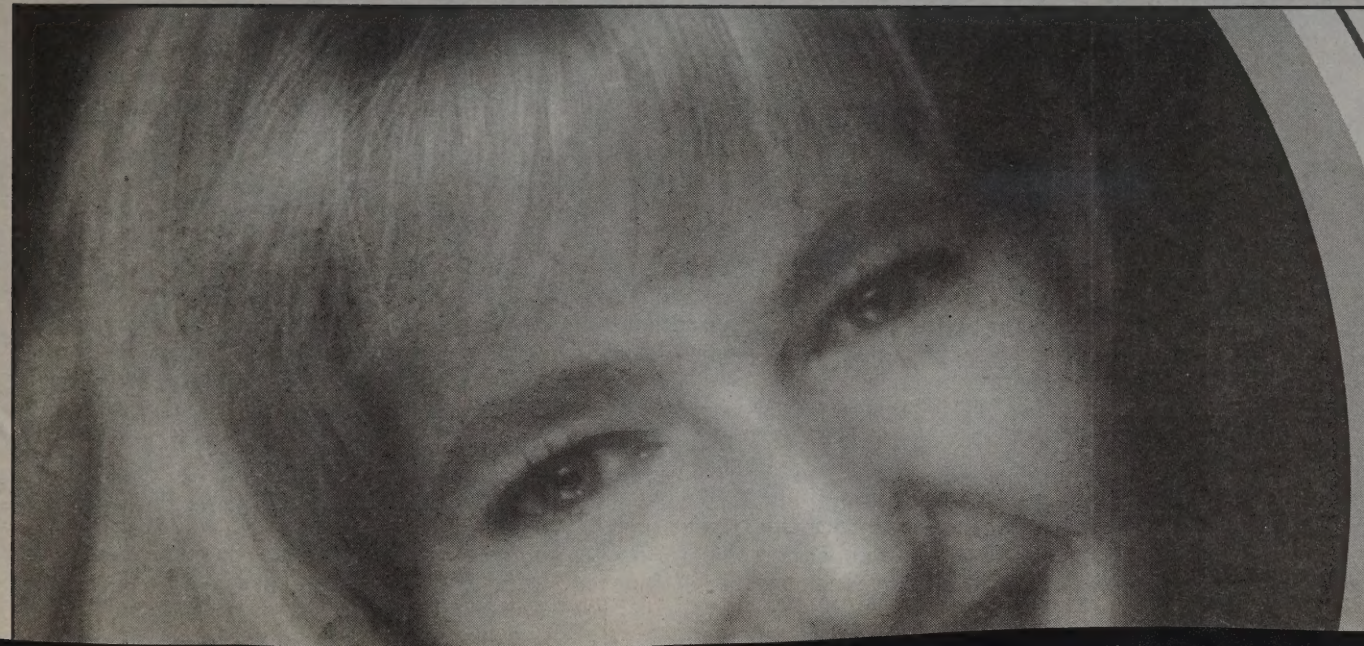
Democrats, many of whom oppose the measure, took delight in the internal Republican troubles, and Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., read aloud from a recent statement on the issue by Lynne Cheney, wife of Vice President Dick Cheney. "When it comes to conferring legal status on relationships, that is a matter that should be left to the states," he quoted her as saying.

The emotionally charged proposal, backed by the president and many other conservatives, provides that marriage within the United States "shall consist only of a man and a woman."

A second sentence says that neither the federal nor any state constitution "shall be construed to require that marriage or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon any union other than the union of a man and a woman." Some critics argue that the effect of that provision would be to ban civil unions, and its inclusion in the amendment has complicated efforts by GOP leaders to gain support from wavering Republicans.

While there was no disagreement that the measure would fall short of the 60 votes needed to advance, Republicans held out hope they could gain a majority. Even that seemed in doubt, although their chances improved when an aide to Sen. John Kerry said he and vice presidential running mate John Edwards did not intend to return to the Capitol for what amounted to a procedural vote.

Both men oppose the amendment.



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